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SURFACING

A New Generation Finds Paradise in Honolulu

By MICHELE KAYAL

“We want to do a little partying here and then relax on Maui,” Chris Brothers, a 36-year-old Manhattan investment banker, said as he cradled a mai tai beside the pool at the Halekulani Hotel a couple of hours after arriving in Honolulu in early January. Mr. Brothers and his girlfriend, Monique Zordan, were adding some city time to their Hawaiian vacation after hearing that Honolulu was attracting a youthful, high-spirited crowd. A friend, Mr. Brothers said, had come back from Honolulu, raving about how it was a “happening place,” and they weren’t letting the opportunity pass them by.

“You don’t want to just surf,” said Christopher Madison, 27, as he sat with his friends in the Wonderlounge at the W Hotel, which, like the Halekulani, is in Waikiki. “You want to have a night life and hang out.”

Not far away, young women in rhinestone-studded jeans were drinking Mumm Champagne and bouncing to the rhythm of thumping house music. “There’s a new social life, a city social life, just appearing,” Mr. Madison said.

Joining Honolulu’s base of Japanese tour groups and American mainlanders in matching flowered shirts is a new group of fun-seekers. Vacationers in their 20’s and 30’s dance in clubs like the new Zen-themed, silk-pillowed O Lounge, in a converted Chinese restaurant just outside Waikiki, or at thirtyninehotel downtown, where laid-back artsy types lounge on a U-shaped sectional as a disco ball spins. They join the locals in a cleaned-up downtown for gallery evenings, happy hour and ethnic dining.

In a survey by Yesawich, Pepperdine, Brown & Russell for its 2004 National Leisure Travel Monitor, 26- to 40-year-olds put Honolulu among the top five destinations they would like to visit in the next two years. The youngest adult travelers, 25 and under, ranked its desirability alongside that of New York, Miami and the Florida Keys.

Tourist visits to Honolulu were up nearly 10 percent in 2004 from 2003, the first increase since the 2001 terrorist attacks; the number of visitors who spent their entire vacation on Oahu was up nearly 14 percent.

These travelers are finding a transformed Waikiki, well into the process of morphing from a tacky resort of aging hotels and Elvis impersonators into what is beginning to pass for urban chic. After half a billion dollars in public and private investment, the main seaside boulevard, Kalakaua Avenue, has wide waterfall-flanked sidewalks and shady knolls, and about a dozen hotels have completed major renovations. One, the Aston Waikiki Beach Hotel, now updated in bright yellows and reds and bamboo curtains depicting vintage hula girls, promoted its new look with the slogan “Aloha With an Attitude.” Luxury retailers like Yves Saint Laurent and Tiffany have opened stores.

As the city’s pulse quickens, more change is on the way. The Waikiki Parc Hotel plans to renovate its guest rooms and replace a cafe that serves an all-you-can-eat buffet from steam trays with a trendy bar.

The Halekulani is taking reservations for its Vera Wang Suite, opening this month. The 2,185-square-foot ocean-view suite was decorated by the designer best known for stylish wedding gowns. The hotel also plans a \$400,000 revamping of its cocktail lounge, with chain draperies and dramatic lighting, the perfect forum for the caipirinhas and flaming drinks that are being created for it by Dale DeGroff, a longtime Rainbow Room bartender turned cocktail consultant.

The next big change in Waikiki will be a \$350 million project by Outrigger Enterprises, which has 15 hotels there, to replace the fast-food restaurants and low-budget hotels of Lewers Street with a suite hotel, a resort condominium, a time-share

development and a retail and entertainment center.

Beyond Waikiki, reinvestment in the downtown has put a new \$11 million face on the 1922 Hawaii Theater and studded a gritty landscape with restored early-20th-century facades, drawing residents and visitors to places they didn't dare venture before.

"There was a time when really sophisticated travelers would avoid Honolulu," said Ron Letterman, chairman of Classic Custom Vacations, based in San Jose, Calif. "All through the 90's they said, 'I don't go to Honolulu - that's a big mess.' " Now, he continued, "that's all changed."

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